Introduction

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With its 5 percent electoral threshold, constitutional goal of creating a “*wehrhafte Demokratie*,” (defensive democracy) and the Christian Democrats’ goal of never allowing a party to their right, the Federal Republic has long seemed immune to the rise of a national-level, populist far-right party.¹ In September 2017, however, Germany joined most European countries when the Alternative for Germany (AfD) entered the Bundestag with over 12 percent of the popular vote. By 2020, the party was represented in all state legislatures in the country and its votes briefly helped elect a state level chief executive in Thuringia.

Written two years after the AfD entered the Bundestag, this two-volume special issue explores a range of initial responses to the AfD’s entry onto the national political scene. The contributors—an interdisciplinary group representing several generations of German politics scholars—draw on comparative examples from across western Europe and throughout German history to contextualize the Alternative for Germany, its foreign policy, and the factors leading to its electoral success. Understanding the origins of the AfD in turn, both helps to develop strategies to counter its influence and to understand why and how other actors in Germany have responded to the entry of a far-right contender into the Federal Republic’s party system. The contributions to this special issue focus on a range of reactions including those of civil society, individuals seeking to become active in politics, Members of the Bundestag (MdB) engaging with their new colleagues, and mainstream political party organizations trying to win back voters. The pieces collected here also consider a range of possible options for those seeking to minimize the AfD’s impact; troublingly, no easy solutions emerge.

Many of the articles in this special issue adopt a comparative perspective on the origins and success of the AfD in order to identify reasons why one in ten voters in the country would cast a ballot for a party representing ideas formerly considered taboo in contemporary domestic politics and foreign

policy. Joyce Marie Mushaben's "A Spectre Haunting Europe: Angela Merkel and the Challenges of Far-Right Populism" addresses both the systemic and individual-level causes of resurgent ethnonationalist voting across EU member states. She traces this development back to broader trends including the shrinking of European welfare states, the global financial crisis of 2008/2009, demographic change, and the influx of refugees and asylum seekers in 2015. At the individual-level, Mushaben identifies intersections between age and gender, along with resentments dating back to unification, that have led middle-aged men to support parties such as the AfD. Gene Frankland's "The Alternative for Germany from Breakthrough toward Consolidation? A Comparative Perspective on Its Organizational Development" compares the AfD's genesis to that of the Greens and the Pirates. His piece considers how parties' "marks of origin" shape their organizational institutionalization over time. His analysis also examines the fate of other far-right parties that have moved from the opposition to government in order to consider future possibilities for the AfD. Frankland's research offers insights into the question of how much institutionalization has already occurred in the AfD. His conclusions—that the AfD is likely to stick around, yet unlikely to moderate—are not heartening.

In "Populist Rhetoric and Nativist Alarmism," Barbara Donovan draws on the 2017 Chapel Hill expert survey of party positions to compare the Alternative for Germany to forty-five other parties in Europe. She determines that the AfD is among Europe's most nativist and most populist parties, extending the dimensions of political competition along the "native vs. foreigner" continuum. The volatile combination of populism and nativism has contributed to the AfD's appeal. David Patton's contribution echoes Donovan's focus on populism and provides an historical perspective, comparing the AfD's claim of tackling issues and representing groups that mainstream political parties ignore with the postulates of prior entrants to the German party system, including the Bund der Heimatvertriebenen und Entrechteten (League of Expellees and Disenfranchised, BHE) in the early 1950s, the Greens in the 1980s, and the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) in the 1990s. Jennifer Yoder's "Revenge of the East?" also identifies parallels between the earlier PDS and today's AfD, arguing that the latter has positioned itself as a "champion of East German interests and identity." In "Pulling up the Drawbridge," Michael Hansen and Jonathan Olsen examine why the AfD resonates with a demographic that would otherwise seem unlikely to support it: migrants from the former Soviet Union. Christiane Lemke's "Right Wing Populism and International Issues" sheds light on an oft-overlooked aspect of the AfD, namely, its foreign policy stance. Her analysis concludes that in this regard, the AfD redefines the core beliefs on which German foreign policy is grounded. Taken together, these articles point

to some disturbing insights. The AfD is a particularly extreme version of the populist radical right. Historically, newcomers can establish themselves in the German party system. And, the AfD may be finding its niche.

In light of the factors contributing to the Alternative for Germany's appeal and organization, the articles included in this special issue also probe responses to its entrance into the Bundestag. Starting at the societal level, Annika Orich's "Archival Resistance: Reading the New Right" examines instances of cultural resistance to the AfD. She studies four such examples including the 2019 republication of Theodor Adorno's 1967 speech on new right-wing radicalism, Volker Weiß' 2017 book *Die autoritäre Revolte*, the backlash to Marc Jongen's 2017 talk at the Hannah Arendt Center at Bard College, as well as Gregor Weichbrodt and Hannes Bajohr's 2015 *Glaube.Liebe.Hoffnung. Nachrichten aus dem christlichen Abendland* project. Christina Xydias turns her attention not to members of society trying to resist the AfD, but toward women who were mobilized to participate in politics because of the party. "This Was the One for Me: AfD Women's Origin Stories" draws on state- and federal-level AfD officeholders' political biographies and public statements to discern gendered explanations why women run for office under the banner of a party calling for women to assume traditional homemaker roles. Xydias argues that women in the AfD experience different pressures from men in the party to explain their presence. Hannah Alarian's "Cause or Consequence? The Alternative for Germany and Attitudes toward Migration Policy" expands the empirical scope of analysis to investigate what impact the Alternative for Germany's entrance into the Bundestag has had on popular opinion regarding migration policy and the cultural integration of immigrants currently residing in Germany. Her nuanced analysis indicates that the AfD's election increased popular hostility to admitting further refugees and immigrants, but it did not translate into support for stricter cultural assimilation policies. Her findings also reveal how close the AfD came to winning more than the three directly elected seats it captured in 2017. These articles show the diverse and often unpredictable effects of the rise of the AfD.

Other authors move their analysis from the societal or individual level to that of political parties grappling both with their vote losses to the AfD as well as with the very pragmatic question of how to interact with far-right MdBs in the course of ordinary parliamentary work. Tackling the latter question, Patton's "Party-Political Responses to the Alternative for Germany in Comparative Perspective" identifies and explains the similarities in the ways in which mainstream political parties have treated the AfD, the PDS, the Greens, and the BHE upon their entrance to the Bundestag. These strategies included heckling or ignoring the newcomers, voting down their legislative

initiatives, keeping them out of the Presidium and refusing to form coalitions with them. Despite the mainstream parties' legislative stance of ignoring past upstart newcomers, Patton also notes that, over time, more moderate parties did adjust their policy positions in order to win back voters from the BHE and the Greens. Yoder's "Revenge of the East?" demonstrates that the Alternative for Germany's appeal to Eastern Germans has not been lost on the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), Social Democratic Party (SPD), or the Left Party. Since the 2017 election, all have put forward special action plans for the east. Frankland describes how in countries such as Austria and Italy populist far-right parties have "matured" in the party system, going on to enter government.² These contributions illustrate that mainstream parties have already begun adjusting to the presence of the AfD and that further changes can be expected.

In sum, these articles demonstrate that the forces propelling the AfD to power were strong ones and are already having ramifications on society, the day-to-day workings of parliament, the positions held by citizens, and the policies adopted by parties. A significant minority of voters ostensibly feel unrepresented by "politics as usual" in the Federal Republic and disagree with the mainstream political parties' policy issues regarding globalization, the welfare state, immigration, social policy, and regional recognition. As a result, the German party system has become more fragmented, with a sixth party, which is inclined to adopt hitherto taboo policy positions, entering the Bundestag. Societal reactions to these developments have been mixed. While some people have reacted with alarm, using cultural means to resist AfD-driven xenophobia, others have been motivated to participate in politics for the first time. Popular attitudes toward migration have become more skeptical of allowing new arrivals into the country. The inner workings of the Bundestag have been disrupted and parties are scrambling to win back voters lost to the Alternative for Germany. Coalition formation has become more difficult as the party system has become more fragmented. The AfD's rise has not come without a response, the first phases of which we examine in more details in the pages to come.

In some form or other, most of our authors grapple with the most appropriate response to the AfD for those who oppose its political stances. The choices are difficult. On the one hand, ignoring the party and the concerns it raises runs the risk of bolstering the AfD's claim that the political mainstream is deaf to, or willfully ignoring, its core issues. On the other hand, addressing the party's non-fact-based claims and callous disregard for human rights risks dignifying some of its most baseless arguments. Trying to take legal action against the AfD, or ostracizing its members of parliament, fuels the party's

claims of victimhood. Refusing to form coalitions with the AfD or to cooperate with its legislative positions pushes the CDU/CSU and FDP to the center/left, leaving an opening on the right for the AfD to fill. Conversely, breaking the *cordon sanitaire* around the AfD by coalescing, cooperating, or watering down its language and adopting its policy proposals, would do little to stop a party including those with neo-Nazi backgrounds and an inner-party wing, the Flügel, deemed a threat to the German constitutional order by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. While the rest of the German political spectrum ponders these trade-offs, the AfD's membership and mass base continue to grow, it is now eligible to receive millions of Euros in federal funding, and after the next legislative period will become eligible for tax money to fund its party foundation.

The articles in these two issues were initially drafted in summer and fall of 2019, prior to the emergence of the Covid-19 global pandemic. The world looks very different now and Germany is no exception. German citizens have viewed Merkel's handling of the crisis very positively. The "Sonntagsfrage"—a public opinion question asking "Who would you vote for if the election were this coming Sunday?"—sees the CDU/CSU receiving around 39 to 40 percent of the vote (up from 32.9 percent at the 2017 election and a low of 26 percent as recently as March). The AfD is polling around 8 to 9 percent, down from 12.6 percent at the election, depending on which public opinion firm is conducting the survey.³ The AfD is also suffering from internal division and some observers think the party may be facing an existential crisis.⁴ On the other hand, Germany is likely headed for economic recession. The AfD is contributing to a protest movement against the continuation of measures implemented to slow the spread of the virus. The situation is volatile and exceptionally difficult to predict.

Perhaps the best long-term solution lies in addressing, on many levels, the root causes of the AfD's rise. As Yoder writes: "As unpleasant as it sounds, the political parties must compete with the AfD; they must explain why the AfD's values, notions of belonging, claims on symbols and narratives from the past, and policy prescriptions are problematic and why their own are better." These arguments need to be made in an authentic language that resonates with ordinary citizens. Politicians need to address Germans' fears about their own and their fellow citizens' economic futures in a global economy, their concerns about the vibrancy of their communities especially in rural eastern areas, their worries about national security in a world filled with porous borders, a deadly virus, and rapidly accelerating climate change. Politics should acknowledge Germans' desire for a feeling of dignity and self-worth in a world with rapidly changing social roles. Civil society actors and parties alike

might seek ways of alleviating the existential fears propelling Germans to support the AfD, not via the party's antidemocratic and human rights violating solutions, but rather by developing a hopeful future vision of a society where democracy and respect for all individuals seem more attractive to voters than hate and exclusion.

Notes

1. The authors would like to thank the contributors to this special issue for their input into this introduction. Any errors remain ours alone. In this introduction we use the term "populist far right" to define the AfD and most of our contributors use this term as well. This umbrella term comes from Cas Mudde (2019) who uses it to describe populist right wing parties that oppose democracy itself (extreme right parties) and those that oppose liberal democracy and its protection of minority rights (radical right parties). Formally, the AfD falls in the latter category but there are certainly those within it and associated with it who fit the former description. See Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Medford, 2019).
2. In early 2020, the extreme reaction to the Thuringian CDU and Free Democratic Party's (FDP) cooperation with the AfD in electing a Minister President for this state—the stepping down of national CDU leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and the almost immediate exit of Thomas Kemmerich following his election—indicate that at least as of this writing, there is a high political price to be paid in Germany for cooperating with the AfD.
3. See <https://www.wahlrecht.de/umfragen/>, accessed 12 June 2020.
4. See <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2020-05/rechtsextremismus-afd-npd-republikaner-parallelen-gemeinsamkeiten-andreas-kalbitz>, accessed 12 June 2020.